
A United Kingdom? The case for a net zero Just Transition Commission

Dr Max Lacey-Barnacle, University of Sussex


27 July 2020

Dr Max Lacey-Barnacle calls for a more joined-up approach across the UK towards tackling the impacts of deep decarbonisation on work and jobs

Last year, the UK was the first country in the world to **pass legislation to become a net zero emissions economy by 2050**. To achieve this, the entire UK economy will have to be radically transformed over 30 years through **deep decarbonisation**.

This commitment was ambitious at conception. Now it has to be achieved amidst an economic crisis, with social inequality brought to the fore through Black Lives Matter protests and the stark inequalities exposed by Covid-19. This has led to many voices calling for a green *and* equitable recovery, able to combine social and environmental concerns in climate change policy.

Academics have long been studying the interaction between decarbonisation and social inequality. Building on the interplay between these concepts, the critical importance of a Just Transition is beginning to make headway in policy.

A Just Transition must be twofold. First, it must understand the labour market impacts of decommissioning fossil fuel power plants and reskilling workers to build and manage the new low-carbon economy.  Second, it must also engage with the social impacts of new low-carbon

energy systems and infrastructures, with an emphasis on equity and justice concerns. A UK-wide commission could begin to address these significant challenges.

Emerging Just Transition organisations

As we transition into a low-carbon era, new governance institutions are required to monitor the social impacts of how this transition will reshape society. This year we have seen the **European Green Deal** integrate a Just Transition mechanism into its design, setting aside €40bn for a Just Transition Fund.

The **emergence of Just Transition commissions across the world** demonstrates the importance of continued policy engagement in the management of low-carbon transitions. Spain, Ireland, Germany, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa have already established such commissions, or something similar, to provide insight into what rapid decarbonisation will mean for society and the economy. **Spain has successfully demonstrated a Just Transition in action** through its €250m *Plan del Carbón* developed with coal mining unions across the country. This plan will see the closure of all coal mines in four regions that are no longer economically viable by 2023.

In the UK, a new institutional infrastructure is slowly emerging to help govern the transition to a low-carbon economy, consisting of disparate just transition and climate justice groups. These organisations are emerging unevenly across the four nations and the UK lacks a cohesive framework for integrating Just Transition into national policy.

Scotland has already established a **Just Transition commission** which draws on **principles outlined by the International Labour**

Organization to pursue a transition to environmentally and socially sustainable jobs, sectors and economies, developing resource efficient and sustainable economic approaches to help address inequality and



poverty and deliver low carbon investment and infrastructure, with a focus on decent, fair and high value work that does not negatively affect the current workforce and overall economy.

Wales has announced intentions to set-up a **Climate Justice Advisory Group** that would perform broadly similar functions. Advising on the Welsh government's decarbonisation policies, the group will consider how to deliver fair work and tackle inequalities in the shift towards a low carbon economy.

Northern Ireland does not have plans for such a commission, but there have been **strong calls** for one. In England, A Just Transition commission has so far only been **proposed for the North**, but it would be far more effective to have an England-wide commission as one arm of a UK-wide just transition commission.

A joined-up approach

The UK currently lacks the institutional infrastructure capable of dealing with the demands of net-zero legislation and a green recovery. In particular, the widespread decommissioning of its fossil fuel infrastructure and the transitioning of workers to new low-carbon industries needs to be a key feature of the UK's recovery programme. Coronavirus and the energy transition have already caused BP to announce the cut of 10,000 jobs, with one-fifth of redundancies in the UK. In addition, up to **30,000 job losses could occur across the North Sea oil and gas sector** as a result of the economic downturn forced by COVID-19.

The future decline of the fossil fuel industry therefore requires new capacities within government for managing such impacts. For example, **Ed Davey** has previously called for the creation of a 'Department for Net Zero' with a wider remit and more powers than BEIS.

A bold and ambitious UK Just Transition Commission could be created to work with a Department for Net Zero and oversee the implementation



of green recovery programmes. Such a commission could be enshrined in law and could also feature in **Common Wealth's radical proposal for a new Green Recovery Act**, ensuring the commission has strong legislative foundations.

The commission should ideally be tasked with three objectives for the UK:

1. Monitor the social and labour market impacts of decommissioning fossil fuel power plants.
2. Understand the social impacts of the new low-carbon economy.
3. Align economic recovery packages with the aims of a green recovery and ensure green jobs are created in communities that need it most.

The commission could also manage a Just Transition Fund for the UK, taking inspiration from the EU and from Labour's 2019 manifesto plans for a **£11bn support package for UK oil and gas workers** transitioning to low-carbon industry. This fund could also lead on delivering financial assistance to UK regions seeking to build their low-carbon economy.

Key to the coming economic recovery is the need to build back better and create new green jobs. Hope can be found in a recent Local Government Association **report** that claimed over one million jobs could be created in England's low-carbon economy by 2050. That level of job creation could be vital to avoid potentially chronic unemployment in the aftermath of Covid-19.

A UK-wide, joined-up Just Transition commission would be at the heart of the UK's low-carbon recovery. Ideally it would support the work of existing organisations in Scotland and the planned new organisation in Wales, whilst supporting the creation of commissions in Northern Ireland and England. It could work with organisations such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, the Resolution Foundation and the **newly established racial inequality commission** to ensure the low-carbon transition is cognisant of broader social justice concerns. Lastly, it would

work closely with grassroots organisations like the **UK Climate Assembly**, to understand the needs of citizens and provide opportunities for citizen input.

If the UK government seeks to align the immediate post-coronavirus economic recovery with the long-term ambitions of the low-carbon energy transition, the right institutional infrastructure needs to be in place. Boris Johnson has committed to "investing in industries and infrastructure that can turn the tide on climate change... doing all we can to boost resilience by shaping economies that can withstand everything nature throws at us". Putting in place the right institutional and governance infrastructure will also help. A UK Just Transition Commission is a good place to start.

*Dr Max Lacey-Barnacle is a research fellow in energy justice at the University of Sussex's Science Policy Research Unit (SPRU). He is also working on the **FAIR project**, which looks at the overlaps between fuel and transport poverty in the UK energy transition.*

